Mexican Drug Cartels Leave a Bloody Trail on YouTube

By Manuel Roig-Franzia
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MEXICO CITY -- Bloody bodies -- slumped at steering wheels, stacked in pickup trucks, crumpled on sidewalks -- clog nearly every frame of the music video that shook Mexico's criminal underworld.

Posted on YouTube and countless Mexican Web sites last year, the video opens with blaring horns and accordions. Valentín Elizalde, a singer known as the "Golden Rooster," croons over images of an open-mouthed shooting victim. "I'm singing this song to all my enemies," he belts out.

Elizalde's narcocorrido, or drug trafficker's ballad, sparked what is believed to be an unprecedented cyberspace drug war. Chat rooms filled with accusations that he was promoting the Sinaloa cartel and mocking its rival, the Gulf cartel. Drug lords flooded the Internet with images of beheadings, execution-style shootings and torture.

Within months, Elizalde was dead, shot 20 times after a November concert. His enemies exacted their final revenge by posting a video of his autopsy, the camera panning from Elizalde's personalized cowboy boots to his bloodied naked body.

Elizalde's narco-ballad video and its aftermath highlight a new surge of Internet activity by Mexican drug cartels, whose mastery of technology gives them a huge advantage over law enforcement agencies. Following the model of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, the cartels have discovered the Web as a powerful means of transmitting threats, recruiting members and glorifying the narco-trafficker lifestyle of big money, big guns and big thrills.

"It's out of control," Victor Clark, a Tijuana-based drug expert, said in an interview.

Drug raids in Mexico now routinely net cameras, computers and intricate computerized surveillance systems along with the usual piles of cash, cocaine and weapons. Hit men are just as likely to pack video cameras as "goat's horns" -- the Mexican drug world's nickname for AK-47 assault rifles.

Mexican police have been slow to recognize the Internet as a font of clues, critics say, a mistake that has increased the ability of the cartels to work in the open.

"Imagine, if you're a policeman, you can find gold here on these Web sites," said Alejandro Páez Varela, an editor at the Mexican magazine Dia Siete who tracks drug gangs' use of the Internet. "It's a shame. Everything's here: names, places. They even say who they are going to kill."
The videos, almost unheard-of a year ago, now show up with disturbing regularity. Last Monday, Mexican newspaper Web sites published portions of a video of a supposed Gulf cartel hit man being questioned by an off-screen interrogator about the February murders of five police officers in Acapulco.

The man wears nothing but underwear. A large "Z" is scrawled in thick ink on his chest, along with the words "Welcome, killers of women and children." The Z is a symbol of the Zetas, the Gulf cartel's notorious hit squad, which was started by former Mexican army special forces officers.

The full version of the video shows assassins decapitating the man by slowing twisting a wire through his neck. It ends with a written threat: "Lazcano, you're next" -- an apparent reference to Heriberto Lazcano, alleged chief of the Zetas.

Viewer comments on the video sites provide some of the possible clues police could be investigating, Clark said. On one recent evening, viewers had posted what appeared to be death threats on a YouTube page showing a bloody narcocorrido video.

"You have few days left, Miguel Treviño," wrote a user named "kslnrv."

"The Internet has turned into a toy for Mexican organized crime," Clark said. "It's a toy, a toy to have fun with, a toy to scare people."

While terrorists have turned to the Internet to communicate with other terrorists, the Mexican cartels appear to be using cyberspace mostly to taunt and threaten enemies. The videos can be explicit or cryptic. Inserting code words is part of the game for drug dealers who delight in leaving riddles to be unscrambled by their rivals and police officers.

Mexican researchers are beginning to examine these Internet postings to monitor who is up and who is down in the drug wars. Páez Varela is tracking an increase in videos posted by the Sinaloa cartel, many of which tout the supposed virtues of its leader, Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán.

Guzmán, who escaped from a high-security Mexican prison in 2001, and his backers appear to be posting more videos of his hit men carrying out executions in parts of Mexico once thought to be under control of the Gulf cartel.

"What Chapo Guzmán is saying is that his militant arm is strong, not just in Sinaloa, but in Veracruz, the state of Tamaulipas and the state of Tabasco," Páez Varela said. "It's like an advertisement."

But the other side is advertising, too, even though its leader, Osiel Cárdenas, was recently extradited to the United States. A video homage to Cárdenas has proliferated on the Web, boasting that he is still powerful.

"With an order from the boss, more heads will roll," an unknown performer sings. As the singer wails, the screen fills with an image of a blood-smeared floor and four heads severed from their
bodies. It ends with a pistol shot into the forehead of a supposed gang member and a gushing wound.

"Mexican law enforcement is ill-equipped to deal with this," Andrew Teekell, an analyst at Stratfor, a private intelligence firm based in Texas, said in an interview. "In the U.S., posting videos like that would be plain crazy -- U.S. law enforcement has guys who do nothing but surf the Internet. But in Mexico, they can get away with it. It shows these cartels are untouchable."

Mexico's federal police agency has a cybercrimes unit, but it has produced few important drug busts. In the meantime, most local police forces pay little attention to the Internet, Clark said. A federal police spokesman declined to discuss ongoing investigations, but said a concerted effort is now being made to track drug gangs on the Internet.

"The police are not taking what narcos post on the Internet seriously," Clark said. "It's a mistake. In terms of investigations, you have to take advantage of all available information."

YouTube, which appears to be the most popular destination for the cartels' videos, removes those flagged by users as objectionable. But the violent clips frequently reappear on the site shortly after being removed. Online comment sections attached to videos disappear, but fill up again when the videos return. The online discussions, in Spanish, are often filled with threats, overt and veiled, as well as streams of profanities.

Mexican drug dealers have for years commissioned composers to write songs in their honor. Now, the Internet is suddenly turning some of them into superstars. None is bigger than Valentín Elizalde.

When he was alive, he never had a best-selling album. But less than four months after his murder and half a year after "To My Enemies" became an Internet hit, Elizalde made it big. On March 3, when Billboard came out with its list of best-selling Latin albums in the United States, Elizalde occupied the top two spots.
Drug cartels raise the stakes on human smuggling

Exploitation of illegal immigrants has become worse, officials say, and the failure of U.S. agencies to work together has hindered efforts to stop the organizations.

By Josh Meyer

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Reporting from Washington — Mexican drug cartels and their vast network of associates have branched out from their traditional business of narcotics trafficking and are now playing a central role in the multibillion-dollar-a-year business of illegal immigrant smuggling, U.S. law enforcement officials and other experts say.

The business of smuggling humans across the Mexican border has always been brisk, with many thousands coming across every year.

But smugglers affiliated with the drug cartels have taken the enterprise to a new level -- and made it more violent -- by commandeering much of the operation from independent coyotes, according to these officials and recent congressional testimonies.

U.S. efforts to stop the cartels have been stymied by a shortage of funds and the failure of federal law enforcement agencies to collaborate effectively with one another, their local and state counterparts and the Mexican government, officials say.

U.S. authorities have long focused their efforts on the cartels' trafficking of cocaine, marijuana, heroin and methamphetamines, which has left a trail of violence and corruption.

Many of those officials now say that the toll from smuggling illegal immigrants is often far worse.

The cartels often further exploit the illegal immigrants by forcing them into economic bondage or prostitution, U.S. officials say. In recent years, illegal immigrants have been forced to pay even more exorbitant fees for being smuggled into the U.S. by the cartel's well-coordinated networks of transportation, communications, logistics and financial operatives, according to officials.

Many more illegal immigrants are raped, killed or physically and emotionally scarred along the way, authorities say. Organized smuggling groups are stealing entire safe houses from rivals and trucks full of "chickens" -- their term for their human cargo -- to resell them or exploit them further, according to these officials and documents.

Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Garden Grove) said greed and opportunity had prompted the cartels to move into illegal immigrant smuggling.

"Drugs are only sold once," Sanchez, the chairwoman of the House Homeland Security border subcommittee, said in an interview. "But people can be sold over and over. And they use these people over and over until they are too broken to be used anymore."
The cartels began moving into human smuggling in the late 1990s, initially by taxing the coyotes as they led bands of a few dozen people across cartel-controlled turf near the border.

After U.S. officials stepped up border enforcement after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the price of passage increased and the cartels got more directly involved, using the routes they have long used for smuggling drugs north and cash and weapons south, authorities said.

Sometimes they loaded up their human cargo with backpacks full of marijuana. In many cases, they smuggled illegal immigrants between the two marijuana-growing seasons, authorities said.

Kumar Kibble, deputy director of the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement's office of operations, said the cartels made money by taxing coyotes and engaging in the business themselves.

"Diversification has served them well," Kibble said.

Unlike the drug-trafficking problem, the cartels' involvement in human smuggling has received scant attention in Washington.

That is the case even as the Obama administration and Congress increasingly focus their attention on Mexico, fearing that its government is losing ground in a battle against the cartels that has resulted in the deaths of more than 7,000 people since the beginning of 2008.

At one of many congressional hearings on the subject last week, Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) unveiled a chart that he said described the cartels' profit centers: drugs, weapons and money laundering.

"I would add one thing, senator," said Arizona Atty. Gen. Terry Goddard, who then described to Durbin his concerns about the cartels' movement into illegal immigrant smuggling. "It is really a four-part trade, and it has caused crime throughout the United States."

Arizona has become the gateway not only for drugs, but also illegal immigrants. Fights over the valuable commodity have triggered a spate of shootings, kidnappings and killings, Goddard and one of his chief deputies said in interviews.

In Arizona, the cartels grossed an estimated $2 billion last year on smuggling humans, Goddard said.

Senior officials from various federal law enforcement agencies confirmed that they were extremely concerned about the cartels' human smuggling network.

In recent years, the U.S. government has taken significant steps to go after illegal immigrant smugglers on a global scale, setting up task forces, launching public awareness campaigns and creating a Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center to fuse intelligence from various agencies.

But at the southern border, the effort has stumbled, in part because Homeland Security and various Justice Department agencies have overlapping responsibilities and are engaging in turf battles to keep them, Goddard and numerous other federal and state officials said.
The vast majority of ICE agents cannot make drug arrests, for instance, even though the same smugglers are often moving illegal immigrants.

The reason: The Drug Enforcement Administration has not authorized the required "cross-designation" authority for them, according to Kibble and others. A top DEA official said that was partly to prevent ICE agents from unwittingly compromising ongoing DEA drug investigations and informants working the cartels.

Agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives focus almost exclusively on cartel efforts to smuggle large quantities of American-made weapons into Mexico.

"The only way we're going to be successful is to truly mount a comprehensive attack upon the cartels. They're doing a comprehensive attack on us through all four of these different criminal activities," Goddard told a Senate Judiciary subcommittee.

"I'm afraid in this country we tend to segregate by specialty the various areas that we are going to prosecute. And our experience on the border is we can't do that. We've got to cross the jurisdictional lines or we're going to fail."

Kibble agreed, saying that the cartels' diversification will require federal agencies to work together. "It means we need more teamwork so things don't slip through the cracks."

He added: "We are very focused on it and applying law enforcement pressure to all aspects of the cartels' activities."

Asked for comment, Justice Department officials referred calls to Homeland Security.

But authorities are also hampered by budget shortcomings and other obstacles.

Even though ICE has primary responsibility over illegal immigrant smuggling, it has only 100 agents dedicated to the task, Kibble said.

There is no line item in ICE's budget for human smuggling, so no one knows how much money is being spent on it, he told Sanchez's border subcommittee, before acknowledging that the agency needs more resources to fight the problem.

There are also not enough resources for providing medical treatment and protection for those illegal immigrants who are caught, so many of them are not available to testify, said Anastasia Brown, the director of refugee programs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

As a result, there have been relatively few prosecutions and convictions.

In fiscal 2008, ICE initiated 432 human smuggling investigations, including 262 cases of alleged sexual exploitation and 170 cases of suspected labor exploitation.

Those efforts resulted in 189 arrests, 126 indictments and 126 convictions related to human smuggling, according to Homeland Security documents provided to Congress.
Cameron H. Holmes, an assistant Arizona attorney general at the front lines of the fight against cross-border human smuggling, agreed that federal authorities were trying to collaborate better.

"Are they working together enough? Absolutely not. Are they being successful? Look around," Holmes said, before describing details of illegal immigrant smuggling cases in which people were killed or enslaved for years.

"We have a multibillion criminal industry that has grown up in the last 10 years and it all involves violations of federal law. I would not call that a success."
EXCLUSIVE: 100,000 foot soldiers in Mexican cartels

Sara A. Carter (Contact)

EXCLUSIVE:

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico

The U.S. Defense Department thinks Mexico's two most deadly drug cartels together have fielded more than 100,000 foot soldiers - an army that rivals Mexico's armed forces and threatens to turn the country into a narco-state.

"It's moving to crisis proportions," a senior U.S. defense official told The Washington Times. The official, who spoke on the condition that he not be named because of the sensitive nature of his work, said the cartels' "foot soldiers" are on a par with Mexico's army of about 130,000.

The disclosure underlines the enormity of the challenge Mexico and the United States face as they struggle to contain what is increasingly looking like a civil war or an insurgency along the U.S.-Mexico border. In the past year, about 7,000 people have died - more than 1,000 in January alone. The conflict has become increasingly brutal, with victims beheaded and bodies dissolved in vats of acid.

The death toll dwarfs that in Afghanistan, where about 200 fatalities, including 29 U.S. troops, were reported in the first two months of 2009. About 400 people, including 31 U.S. military personnel, died in Iraq during the same period.

The biggest and most violent combatants are the Sinaloa cartel, known by U.S. and Mexican federal law enforcement officials as the "Federation" or "Golden Triangle," and its main rival, "Los Zetas" or the Gulf Cartel, whose territory runs along the Laredo,Texas, borderlands.

The two cartels appear to be negotiating a truce or merger to defeat rivals and better withstand government pressure. U.S. officials say the consequences of such a pact would be grave.

"I think if they merge or decide to cooperate in a greater way, Mexico could potentially have a national security crisis," the defense official said. He said the two have amassed so many people and weapons that Mexican President Felipe Calderon is "fighting for his life" and "for the life of Mexico right now."

As a result, Mexico is behind only Pakistan and Iran as a top U.S. national security concern, ranking above Afghanistan and Iraq, the defense official added.
Other U.S. officials and Mexico specialists agreed with this assessment.

Michael V. Hayden, who left as CIA director in January, put Mexico second to Iran as a top national security threat to the United States. His successor, Leon E. Panetta, told reporters at his first news conference that the agency is "paying ... a lot of attention to" Mexico.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told CBS' "60 Minutes" on Sunday that "the stakes are high for the safety of many, many citizens of Mexico and the stakes are high for the United States no doubt."

In a December interview with The Times, President Bush said his successor would need to deal "with these drug cartels in our own neighborhood. And the front line of the fight will be Mexico."

A State Department travel advisory last month seemed timed to caution U.S. students contemplating spring breaks south of the border.

"Some recent Mexican army and police confrontations with drug cartels have resembled small-unit combat, with cartels employing automatic weapons and grenades," the advisory said.

Independent analysts warn that narco-terrorists have infiltrated the Mexican government, creating a shadow regime that further complicates efforts to contain and destroy the cartels.

"My greatest fear is that the tentacles of the shadow government grow stronger, that the cartels have penetrated the government and that they will be able to act with impunity and that this ever stronger shadow government will effectively evolve into a narco-state," said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington.

The Mexican Embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment on the drug war.

Mr. Calderon, however, has adamantly denied assertions that Mexico is becoming a failed state.

The Mexican government has "not lost any part - any single part - of the Mexican territory to drug cartels," he recently told the Associated Press.

His comments run counter to the impressions of U.S. law enforcement officials and some Mexican journalists reporting in Ciudad Juarez, a city just across the border from El Paso, Texas.

On a recent morning here, the once-bustling border town of 1.3 million was more like a ghost town.
"It's empty," said a vendor of freshly baked tortillas and salsa, who asked to be identified only by her first name, Maria. "We are in a losing war against the narco-traffickers. My business is dying, and soon it will join the graveyard of businesses that have had to close down. No one comes Juarez anymore."

More than 1,800 people have been killed in the city since last year. The number continued to climb as The Times visited, with more than 20 deaths in one week.

In response to the challenge, U.S. and Mexican authorities have stepped up raids on cartel members in both countries.

Last week, U.S. and Mexican forces arrested 755 people, including 52 in the United States associated with the Sinaloa cartel. However, cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman is still at large. He is thought to be living in Sinaloa and protected by hired gunmen and Mexican federal officials on his payroll, said a U.S. law enforcement official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the ongoing intelligence operations.

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) spokesman Garrison Courtney said last week's raids put a dent in cartel operations but that public attention to the crisis has been long in coming.

"If we don't start paying attention, the violence - which has already spilled into the U.S. - is going to get worse," Mr. Courtney said. "This is a shared interest between the United States and Mexico to go after these drug traffickers."

In recent years, however, U.S. officials have been reluctant to share information with Mexican counterparts, fearing that they will leak to the cartels.

DEA officials interviewed by The Times said the Sinaloa cartel employs Mexican federal officials, while other cartels pay off local governments and police.

"Many times, what you see isn't really what's going on," said a DEA official, who asked not to be named because of the nature of his work. "Many times the death of federal officers or local police isn't a cartel making the hit, but the cartels themselves in the government fighting one another. The same thing has happened to the Mexican army, where the cartels have also bought loyalty to move dope into the U.S."

Mr. Courtney said the Mexican cartels have "evolved into the Colombian cartels of the 1980s. Even the government's reaction to what's going on there right now and over the last five years is what the government of Colombia faced when they went after Pablo Escobar. Juarez has seen an escalation in that same type of brutal violence."

Escobar was a Colombian drug lord who died in 1993.

More than 2,000 Mexican army soldiers and 425 federal police are patrolling in Chihuahua state, where Ciudad Juarez is located. More than 45,000 Mexican troops have been engaged in the drug war since Mr. Calderon took office in 2006.
Mr. Carpenter said the use of the Mexican military may be backfiring.

"I said at the time when Calderon called the military to take the lead role in confronting the cartels that he was undertaking a massive gamble," Mr. Carpenter said. "It is clear now that he is losing that gamble if he has not already lost it."

A U.S. counterterrorism official said, however, that the severity of the crisis was bringing the U.S. and Mexican governments closer and that the CIA will work closely with Mexico if asked for guidance.

"Both countries have a common interest in clamping down on the cartels, and that has shaved away some of the underlying historical tensions in what has long been a close relationship with Mexico," said the official, who spoke on the condition that he not be named. "The Mexicans understand - perhaps more so than at any time in recent memory - that we are genuine about taking these people on."

Meanwhile, thousands of Mexicans daily cross the Santa Fe bridge, which connects Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, ironically one of the safest U.S. cities.

"Why should we have to live like this?" asked Maria, the vendor. "Why do our children have to die, while our neighbors live like nothing is happening? Every day we pray for something different, for peace. Every day our prayers are left unanswered."